

# Northumbria Research Link

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***Watching the pennies and the people –  
how volunteer led sport facilities have cut  
costs and improved the quality of service  
for local communities***

**UKSDN, November 2017**

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# Overview

- What is asset transfer and the current picture among sport facilities in the UK?
- Summary of the previous research on social entrepreneurial benefits of large leisure trusts
- Our research question
- What methods did we use?
- What has changed within these facilities?
  - Cost reduction
  - Enterprise and innovation
  - Why have these changes taken place?
- Conclusions and questions raised

# Recent Asset Transfer in SPORT

- Swimming pools and sport/leisure centres.
- Also happening with libraries.
- Volunteers plan and execute the transfer to trust-status themselves.
- Take roles of governance and delivery afterwards.
- An alternative to local government closing non-statutory services as a consequence of reduced funding.





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**30th APRIL 2014**  
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## Tadcaster swimming pool an example of the Big Society at work



## Volunteers' efforts sees gymnastics facility reopen

by Mark Tallentire  
[news@durhamtimes.co.uk](mailto:news@durhamtimes.co.uk)

OVER 25 years, Deerness Gymnastics Club has produced more than 80 international gymnasts and brought home more than 60 world and European medals - winning four world and five European titles.

And all this came out of the small village of Ushaw Moor, in County Durham.

Coaches, parents and gymnasts alike were devastated, therefore, when, earlier this year, Durham County Council announced plans to close its base, Deerness leisure centre, in a bid to cut costs.

However, volunteers have put together a successful rescue package and will re-open the centre as a gymnastics academy on Monday.

Karl Wharton, the academy's director of gymnastics, said: "It's our aim to run it as a gymnastics community facility where we cater for everything from mothers, toddlers and babies through to high-level international cer-



**IN TRAINING:** Gymnasts at the academy

formers and old age pensioners, who want to come along and do something gymnastics-related just to keep fit.

"This facility was identified as an Olympic training venue two or three years ago and it's immensely important for British gymnastics.

"We were all devastated because we never expected that decision would be made - to close a high-performance centre."

"Initially there was shock. But we decided there was no way we would let it go. Parents and helpers have come on board and we now have 150 volunteers who want to keep it open as a true community facility."

Jessie Heskett, 17, who is part of the current British champions senior men's four, trains at the centre five times a week, for four hours at a time.

"It was quite disappointing to hear about the closure. There was panic. But the plans are very exciting. It gives us a lot more freedom and flexibility."

Durham County Council-run leisure centres in Crook and Ferryhill will close tomorrow, although community groups are still fighting to prevent them being demolished.

Centres in Sherburn and Coxhoe will reopen as community-run facilities in coming months, while the council is retaining Pity Me's facility on reduced hours.

For more information on Deerness Gymnastics Academy, visit [deernessgymnastics.org.uk](http://deernessgymnastics.org.uk)



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# Previous research on impact of leisure

## **trusts** (Simmons, 2004 and 2008, Reid, 2003)

- More attentive management/managerialist approach/business like fashion
- increased income and reduced expenditure
- greater customer orientation (although service improvements were minor)
- culture change - greater autonomy, flexibility, need to be competitive, greater sense of responsibility of staff

# Previous research on impact of leisure trusts (Reid, 2003)

- Improved financial performance – exemption from non-domestic rates only?
- Limitations to realise benefits - financial reliance on local authority grants, requirements to use Council services, and the local authority not fully realising the Trusts legitimacy as a service provider.
- Criticism of the concept of a ‘third way’:  
‘what matters is what works’ or ‘what works for whom?’.



# Previous research on small trusts

- Increase in trading income, culture of enterprise, alternative income streams. (Fenwick and Gibbon, 2015)
- entrepreneurial innovation, greater risk taking, alternative non-sport services, attraction of non-sport funding and partnership working, sustainable niches in under-served segments of the market key holder system for clubs independent use (Reid, 2016)





# Research questions

- Have the facilities become more competitive by reducing costs?
- Have the facilities been able to be more enterprising and innovative in their offer to the customer?
- Why have these changes taken place?

# Methods

- Semi-structured interviews with managers and volunteers (sometimes the same person);
- In 8 sport facilities (research also conducted in libraries)
- Mainly facilities transferred from local government to volunteer control;
- One facility built by the community, and one facility in an authority which developed volunteers to work alongside employees ;
- All interviews conducted 2014-15.

Facility	Overview
Sport facility A	A centre which houses a <b>fitness suite, swimming pool, steam room and space for community events, meetings and fitness classes</b> . Established in 1903, community led since 2013.
Sport facility B	<b>Centre of gymnasiums, dance studio, activity and fitness rooms</b> . Transferred in 2011 to a sports club which specialises in acrobatic gymnastics and tumbling. The facility is operated by a limited company (some members of the club) and the club is a charity.
Sport facility C	Council <b>pool and gym</b> , closed in 1991, reopened by Friends of the Pool, became a charity with limited guarantee, in 1992.
Sport facility D	<b>A group of facilities - pool, leisure centre and gym</b> . Under the management remit of a charitable trust, since 2005.
Sport facility E	<b>A small swimming pool</b> ; a charitable Trust, formed in 1993 to run the pool.
Sport facility F	The trust are a company limited by guarantee, created to take over the management of a <b>Pool</b> in 2007.
Sport facility G	A community <b>swimming pool</b> , the pool operates as a charity. Run by volunteers since 2012.
Sport facility H	Purpose-built community asset, opened in 1994. <b>Two pools, fitness suites and small social area</b> . Trust is a registered charity, limited by guarantee.

# Example - Bramley Baths, Leeds



- A small swimming pool and leisure centre – outskirts of Leeds – built in 1903. Used by local residents and schools for swimming lessons.
- Opening hours reduced in September 2011 as part of a spending review by Leeds City Council.
- Local community group established to support the pool in February 2011 and re-opened in January 2013 as an Industrial Provident Society on a 25-year lease from the Council.
- Houses a fitness suite, swimming pool, steam room and space for community events, meetings and fitness classes.
- The trustees are volunteers, and both paid workers and volunteers manage the pool and deliver the service.





# Legal Status and Volunteer Involvement

<div> <div></div> <div>Governance</div> <div>Delivery</div> </div>	Governance By Paid Staff	Governance by Paid Staff and Volunteers	Governance by Volunteers
Delivery By Paid Staff		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Facility E</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Facility G</li> <li>•Facility D</li> </ul>
Delivery by Paid Staff and Volunteers		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Facility C</li> <li>•Facility H</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Facility A</li> <li>•Facility F</li> <li>•Facility B (from 2<sup>nd</sup> year)</li> </ul>
Delivery by Volunteers			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Facility B (during 1<sup>st</sup> year)</li> </ul>

# Findings: Cost reduction

- **Financial support:** excellent LA support – business planning and technical training, rate relief, favourable leases, grants, liability protection, TUPEE (re-deployment?)
- **Attention to detail:** Close watch on each cost item (e.g. renegotiated utility bills).
- **Volunteer job replacement:** Effective use of volunteers
- **Paid staff changes** – inter-changeable between roles and multi-tasking reduce costs of specialists/change to terms and conditions
- **Grants and fundraising**
- **Building change and refurbishment.**

# Findings: Enterprise and Innovation

**Customer orientation:** build services around customer needs not staff constraints, communication with users, sensitive and responsive to consumer needs (volunteer market info. system).

**Programme development:** staff created programme ideas to fill low use times, contrasting to how in the past they were not concerned about customer levels

**Change in services:** re-assessment of space use and programming to improve existing services and develop new service, including non-sports ones

*“...essentially there are good things about running a relatively small organisation because you’ve got people on the Board that are from the community, the staff all live locally and they’ve got good links into the community so you can make decisions based on the local offering or what locals want..”* (Sport Facility D)

*“I think it has changed the community’s perceptions about what a swimming pool could be or what a leisure centre could be or what it could be used for. Erm, when X City Council had it, it was just the very minimum...”* (Sport Facility A)

# Findings: Why have these changes taken place?

**Entrepreneurialism:** driven by the need to compete to survive; shorter chain of command; free from corporate (LA) 'shackles' & political interference;

**Ownership:** greater sense of responsibility for success and growth of community ownership (whether volunteers or paid staff).

**Focus:** focus on single/smaller number of services (e.g. the pool) rather than a larger or several leisure centres.

*"We looked at our pricing and we thought we can change things, the next day change the programme, change that, you didn't have to put a report in to account for something, it was a bureaucracy of the local authority then which slowed everything down."* (Sport facility C)

*"We know each other's roles so rather than having the mentality that's not my role, I'm not going to do anything, we have the mentality of well I can do that or they can do that and we try to cover each other's roles really to try to offer the best service to the customers, you know customer-service wise but also offer it staff-wise as we can."* (Sport facility H)





# Conclusions and Questions Raised

- Overall benefits from 'small scale' community management:
  - ❖ Cost reduction, but dependent on LA financial support in the form of peppercorn rents, rate relief etc.
  - ❖ Flexible and responsive management improving the offer to customers, thus increasing revenue. Together these will improve economic sustainability.
  - ❖ Attention to both can be better in the smaller leisure trust
- However
  - smaller size of the new trusts and the far greater role of key volunteers means they are more vulnerable
  - Replacement or less favourable conditions for employees
  - Marginalisation of some classes from volunteer and customer groups
- Limitations: sample size – exploratory.
- Need to look further at:
  - National picture;
  - Those that failed to transfer or failed after transfer;
  - 'What works for whom?'
  - Local government and supporting body perspectives.

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# Our related research

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# ANY QUESTIONS?



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